



SMUGGLING SHAME OF SCHOOL GOVERNOR

Jailed twice
after gang
brought millions
of cigarettes
into the UK

SPECIAL INVESTIGATION

By JON AUSTIN jon.austin@nqe.com

A SCHOOL governor has quit as the Echo today reveals he was part of a gang which smuggled millions of cigarettes into Britain.

Richard Sheridan, 40, the main spokesman for travellers living illegally at Dale Farm, Crays Hill, has twice been locked up for smuggling.

FULL STORY: PAGES 19, 20, 21

■ Criminal past - school governor and traveller spokesman Richard Sheridan has been involved in cigarette smuggling operations



■ Illegal haul - the cigarettes were hidden among fruit and veg

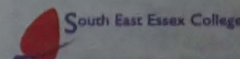


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RICHARD SHERIDAN: SAINT OR SINNER?

'If the *Echo* prints anything it is slander. It is going on hearsay'

RICHARD Sheridan denied being convicted for smuggling when contacted by the *Echo*.

Despite his convictions being a matter of public record, he said: "If you print anything it's slander. You are going on hearsay."

He said he would complain to the Commission for Racial Equality (now the Human Rights and Equalities Commission) if we published and refused to comment further.

We called again 24 hours later, offering a second chance to comment, but he declined.

Court records show during his June 2006 sentence, defence lawyer Mr P. Simms, described his first spell behind bars as a "salutary wake-up call".

Mr Simms said: "He has, since he's been released, been actively involved within the travelling community."

"He is a commissioner of the Gypsy Council and has liaised with both local and central government."

"He has also been involved with various police forces, liaising again, on behalf of the community with the chief police officers in various areas."

"In addition, he has become a school governor."

"Your honour will see a man, who prior to going to prison, was in a pattern of offending, or perhaps a pattern was emerging, but, having been sentenced to 12 months imprisonment, he's very much changed and turned his life around."

His dad, John O'Brien's defence involved a character reference from his local parish priest in Wolverhampton.

The court also heard O'Brien is diabetic and needs regular insulin injections. He was the main carer for a disabled daughter and the stress of waiting a year after pleading guilty had been a sentence in itself.

Sheridan's campaigning over Dale Farm has been high profile. It has involved working along side the likes of movie star Vanessa Redgrave and actor brother Corin, who collapsed from a

heart attack during a Basildon Council eviction vote in 2003. He also worked with Lib Dem peer Lord Avebury, founder of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Gypsy and Traveller Law Reform.

He now says it is Basildon Council which is foul of the law, and shaming the 2004 Housing Act by not providing alternative sites before evicting travellers.

He has told countless meetings his extended family is breaking no laws remaining at Dale Farm and just wants access to electricity and water.

Lord Avebury praised him for volunteering to work on behalf of the travellers.

He said: "There is always the possibility of someone convicted of a criminal offence genuinely turning over a new leaf."

"He does appear to be a very strong campaigner for the gipsy cause. He is very active in volunteering and energetic, which does indicate he has turned over a new leaf."

His cohorts were Danny Flynn, 38, from Caravan Site, Three Cherry Trees Lane, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire and Richard O'Brien, 24 — a cousin of Dale Farm spokesman Richard Sheridan — from Monks Hill, Rathkale, Limerick, Ireland.

The ringleader was Daniel O'Brien, 38, of Roches Road, Rathkale, an antique and car dealer.

They too were all jailed for two years.

A trial at Palais de Justice, Bruges, Belgium, heard the men were part of a highly organised criminal gang of up to 150 travellers with UK and Irish passports who used violence and intimidation to force drivers at truck stops to carry



Concealed — the cigarettes, since hidden in a lorry load of fruit and vegetables

Gang members jailed for 2 years



■ Daniel O'Brien — ringleader of the smugglers

A DALE Farm traveller was jailed for two years for being in an organised crime gang which terrified truck drivers into smuggling tobacco.

James Gannell, 29, from Oak Lane, Billericay, was one of four travellers convicted in June 2004 of belonging to an organised gang suspected of trafficking up to £2m of tobacco from Belgium to Britain over two years.

His cohorts were Danny Flynn, 38, from Caravan Site, Three Cherry Trees Lane, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire and Richard O'Brien, 24 — a cousin of Dale Farm spokesman Richard Sheridan — from Monks Hill, Rathkale, Limerick, Ireland.

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large amounts of tobacco to the UK. Police estimated the wider group was shipping 30,000 packets of tobacco to England a month, making £20,000 a week. The period the gang operated overlaps with the time Richard Sheridan and his dad arranged cigarette deals in Belgium, but there is no evidence of a direct link.

The trial heard they offered drivers cash to take small amounts of tobacco, before increasing the load, and scaring them into thinking they were working for the IRA.

They were arrested near Zeebrugge in January 2004 in possession of two boxes of tobacco, each containing 120 50g packets.

They denied the charges, claiming not to know each other, and were heading to a Paris antique fair.

Mobile phone records showed they were in Belgium over a longer period and were contacting each other.

A statement from a tobacco wholesaler said he recognised a number of them over a period of a year and a half. The businessman based in Antwerp admitted a history of business with the travellers and provided details of quantities they bought.

RICHARD Sheridan has resigned as a governor in the wake of our revelations.

Sheridan quit the Crays Hill Primary School's board after we approached him for a comment.

Questions were today being asked how he became a governor in the first place with such convictions.

He was appointed in February 2006, four months before his second prison term.

Governor meeting minutes show he rarely attended.

He was not CRB checked, but filled out a "self disclosure" with

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out admitting to his criminal past.

His June 2006 defence argued for a lighter sentence because he was a governor, and claimed the school was aware of any prosecutions.

Essex County Council says it or the school has never known.

Anyone with a sentence of three or more months in the five years before becoming a governor is banned from being one.

Serving governors receiving three or more months should be dismissed.

After Sheridan's 2006 release he

remained in the post, with County Hall none the wiser.

This is the second embarrassment for County Hall linked to Sheridan. Last May, it approved a £12,000 grant for a job cabin community centre which went up on Sheridan's illegal caravan pitch at Dale Farm without planning permission.

Basildon councillor Terri Sargent, a former governor at the school, said: "How could this happen? When you are working with children you have to be checked."

Yet it is discretionary for governing bodies to use CRBs or self-dis-

closure systems. Jo Lang, chairman of governors, said: "In February 2006, all the governors had yet to be CRB checked, and were appointed on self-declarations."

In late 2007, as a result of a review, the governing body took the decision to request all members apply for a CRB.

Sheridan was the only governor not to have been vetted, because he filled out the form incorrectly.

Ms Lang added: "It was not completed to the satisfaction of the disclosures unit."

"Other commitments have prevented Mr Sheridan attending gov-

erning body meetings this academic year and we had no chance to follow the form up. It was appropriate to accept his resignation in light of the disclosures."

How could this happen?

When you are working with children you have to be checked

Awards recognise his work for Dale Farm community

LOOKING leaner after a second spell behind bars, Richard Sheridan shows off a Yellow Rose Award for efforts to bridge gaps between travellers and residents.

Michelle Banks, head of the Department for Communities and Local Government, Gypsy and Traveller Unit, and Richard Bennett, chairman of the Local Government Association Gypsy and Traveller task group, presented the award in September 2006.

Sheridan mixed with senior police officers, teachers and council staff at the Kent County Council sponsored event organised by Leaver pressure groups.

Sheridan has liaised with police chief constables, spoken at international conferences and urged the Council of Europe at Brussels, for support.

Sheridan has also been allowed to influence Government decisions on traveller site provision, while Crays Hill villagers have been denied meetings.

Travellers stand to profit if Dale Farm got planning permission and Sheridan's wife owns more green belt land at Kennel Lane, Billericay.

He sat on a panel advising the former Office of the Deputy Prime Minister on traveller issues and has attended a number of Government meetings and lunches at Westminster with senior officials.

Two months before being jailed in June 2006, he made an anti-eviction statement in Westminster.

He once boasted to the *Echo* of having a suitcase full of business cards of powerful people, including

MPs. Sheridan took over the battle to save Dale Farm in 2005, after his first release from prison, becoming chairman of its residents' association.

"That year he talked of standing for Parliament against Tory Billericay MP John Baron, but never did."

He is a regular at parliamentary committee room meetings organised by Lib Dem peer Lord Avebury. Lord Avebury, who founded the All Party Parliamentary Group on Traveller Law Reform, gave Sheridan an award for volunteer work at a house of Lords ceremony in summer 2006.

Sheridan also got a community award from Essex Fire and Rescue for work to fire safety at the Dale Farm site.



■ Yellow roses — Richard Sheridan and Jo Jones of Gypsy and Traveller Affairs receive awards



■ Certificate — Richard Sheridan displays an award for his volunteer work presented to him by Lord Avebury



■ Fire and safety — Richard Sheridan receives an award from Essex County Fire and Rescue

Charity commission to investigate

RICHARD Sheridan joined the GYPSY Council two months before being jailed in 2006, later becoming its president.

It was funded £10,300 by Comic Relief in 2007 and he is a director (trustee) according to accounts.

Yet people with unspent convictions for deception or dishonesty are barred from being a trustee.

Jo Moir, charity commission spokeswoman, said: "Charities that use director and trustee as terms would be implying their board of directors for the company are most likely also trustees."

"However, Mr Sheridan is not on our list of trustees for dishonesty, because it has not updated us with an annual return since 2003. This is something we will look into."

The latest accounts it filed for 2007, three months late, showed

total funds of £7,228. In September trustee Thomas Acton launched a whirlwind to its representatives to a conference, saying: "The Gypsy Council has run out of money." The charity says it has increased support for "charitable activities" at the site.

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TOMORROW: CIGARETTES IN DEATH TRAP SOFAS?

SCHOOL GOVERNOR WAS A CONVICTED CIGARETTE SMUGGLER



■ Richard Sheridan – celebrating the verdict on a travellers' planning application at the Royal Courts of Justice in London last year

THE MAN at the centre of the battle to save the illegal Dale Farm traveller site at Crays Hill, has twice been jailed for organised cigarette smuggling.

School governor Richard Sheridan – real name Richard O'Brien – was in a gang estimated to have evaded nearly £9million in excise duty by smuggling at least 67.6million cigarettes.

Sheridan, 40, received a 12-month prison sentence after pleading guilty to conspiracy to fraudulently evade excise duty in June 2006.

He was also jailed for a year after admitting a similar offence linked to the gang in September 2004.

The Echo was alerted to his past by a traveller, who said: "He is always in the paper with hard luck stories, but it's hypocritical."

"It was serious stuff."

Customs seized 1,099,200 counterfeit Regal Kingsize cigarettes, which Sheridan and his father John O'Brien, 62, from Fifth Avenue, Wolverhampton, arranged to be delivered to King George Dock, Hull.

O'Brien also pleaded guilty to conspiracy to fraudulently evade excise duty in June 2006 and was jailed for a year.

The cigarettes were concealed among fruit and vegetables in a lorry which arrived on June 2, 2003. Duty evaded was £161,000.

Less than a month later, on June 23, Sheridan was arrested after being caught red-handed with other people unloading 640,000 cigarettes from a trailer at a Midlands address where £69,000 cash was found.

Sheridan, a minister of holy communion at Our Lady of Good Counsel Catholic Church, Wickford, was jailed

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for a year in September 2004 at Wolverhampton Crown Court for the second offence, when £70,000 duty was evaded.

The 2006 Hull Crown Court conviction was for the earlier seizure, when his dad and three other gang members were sentenced.

Laurence Myers, 60, was the book keeper. A further 29,500 cigarettes were found in his house where officers also found documents detailing dealers, 18 brands of cigarettes and price lists, which allowed customs to calculate amounts involved.

Myers, who was jailed in 2000 for taking the identity of an uncle he was caring for to steal £90,675, was re-arrested, while on bail for the first seizure, in Manchester after being caught with £826,360 of cigarettes.

Myers, from Park Lane, Manchester, pleaded guilty to being knowingly concerned with others in the fraudulent evasion of duty between April 1, 2003, and December 3, 2003, conspiracy to fraudulently evade excise duty and keeping dutiable goods at home.

He was jailed for two years at Hull Crown Court on June 16, 2006, and ordered to pay £4,447,927 by a proceeds of crime confiscation hearing.

He was jailed for 30 further months in January 2007 at Manchester Crown Court for the other seizure.

Turk Vogan Baskale, the driver of the first seizure, and Ludo Gijzen, who ran a Belgian export business which arranged that delivery, each received nine months in December 2003.

Contraband channelled through Belgium

RICHARD Sheridan and his dad John O'Brien were responsible for sourcing cigarettes in Belgium, Hull Crown Court heard.

Nick Worsley, prosecuting, said they were on the continent, obtaining documents and organising the shipment.

He said: "They were buying anonymously registered mobile telephones to make contact with people back in the UK, showing perhaps a degree of sophistication, trying to cover their tracks."

The gang got together false paperwork saying the delivery on June 2, 2003, was for Manchester fruit trader Ernest Broadbent.

Customs discovered the company had no knowledge of this.

Driver Vogan Bascali, 49, from Heusden Zolder, Belgium, was arrested at King George Dock, Hull, and denied smuggling.

He said the delivery was arranged by exporter Louis

They were buying anonymously registered mobiles to make contact with people in UK

Gijzen, 66, from Antwerp, Belgium.

Gijzen was arrested three months later, denying involvement, saying it was arranged by O'Brien and Sheridan.

Officers found O'Brien's details in Gijzen's electronic organiser, which detailed quantities of cigarettes.

Mr Worsley said: "It seems that he (Gijzen) was simply involved in setting up the shipment and not buying cigarettes. That was down to Sheridan and O'Brien."

O'Brien was arrested on October 31, 2003. Details of Sheridan's prosecution for the June 26 seizure and Belgian hotel

receipts were in his house. Mr Worsley added: "There's a clear pattern. This shipment having failed first time, Sheridan continued importing or being involved in the importation less than a month later."

Sheridan – who has a 1985 theft conviction and one in 1989 for dishonesty – used aliases in interview and made no comment.

Mr Worsley said: "Richard Sheridan, or O'Brien, has a number of dates of birth. He could be 40, he could be 36."

On Sheridan's mobile were Gijzen's number and vehicle registrations of Baskale's lorry.

Laurence Myers's role was

sending a fax to Gijzen's office on May 30, 2003, claiming to be from the fruit wholesaler.

Myers was arrested in December 2003. His two mobile phones had made calls to Sheridan, and O'Brien at the time of both seizures.

They showed when Sheridan and O'Brien stayed in Ghent.

Sentencing, Judge Roger Thorne QC, said: "They are all conspirators together."

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